Chapter 9. "How *Eve* Saved My Soul": Sonic Lineage as the Prequel to the Playlist Project

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My mom departed from this physical plane called life on July 27, 2019. It was easily the most devastating blow of my life. My mom was one of those old-school Black women; she raised her three children, then raised me (I'm technically her great nephew), her three grandchildren, and one more of my cousins. They just don't make the cloth humans like my mom was stitched from, simple and plain. She was a miracle worker, moving mountains while here on Earth, and continuing such feats on the next part of her journey. I say this because I got a call to teach my first college-level hip-hop class immediately after her passing. A good colleague and better friend was serving as deputy chair; when she called, she basically said, "I have to call you because I know you would NOT be okay if I didn't. And I know you just lost your mom. But I have to tell you this: Our Hip-Hop Worldview class needs an instructor—and everyone is wondering where you are and if you can teach it. . . ."

As you can imagine, this moment didn't strike me as sheer coincidence. I found it to be kairos: the perfect moment where space, time, and location intersected. I also saw this as my mom's blessing. After being on the tenure track for five years in a retrograde department that rejects contemporary scholarship, rebukes the field of comp/rhet writ large, diminishes my own research, and had relegated my expertise to only teaching sections of first-year writing, teaching Hip-Hop Worldview was a dream come true. This dream, however, did not erase the sheer pain that comes with losing a parent. And in the midst of my mother's death, I was simply trying to put the pieces of my life back together and find my way back through and into my life's requirements.

Enter *Eve*—The Makings of Healing Through Sonics

I share these very raw life moments as integral points of context. At the nexus where my mother's passing and the beginning stages of this class meet, I found myself entrenched in a piece of art-turned-sonic therapy: Rapsody's (2019) album *Eve*. This brilliant musical project highlights Rapsody taking a sonic journey through the evolution and iconic nature of Black women. Each song is named after a significant and charismatic Black woman throughout global culture who has achieved great success in her life—a success that speaks to the radiance and resilience we now call

#BlackGirlMagic. An ode to Black women in its totality, each song sonically evokes and symbolizes Rapsody's chosen subject. This album was nominated for a 2020 Grammy award (the nomination sans victory is another conversation by itself). I deemed this album therapeutic because while listening, I could see and hear my mom at every turn; each song presented me with a facet of her being. And every day I waded through the listening of it, trying to make sense of how to persevere and honor the legacy of a woman who raised me when she didn't have to.

The centerpiece of this album for me was "Ibtihaj." The beat, produced by 9th Wonder, is a remix/reproduction of the GZA's song entitled "Liquid Swords," which makes it a fitting tribute to Olympic fencing bronze medalist Ibtihaj Muhammad. "Ibtihaj" features R&B enigma D'Angelo on the chorus, with GZA providing a guest verse. Besides the fact this song slaps stupid, what struck me most was that Rapsody's 2019 lyrical content was evoking the sonic textures and sentiments of 1995 Wu-Tang sonics. Set in Harlem, New York (Rapsody is from North Carolina), the video also evokes the legacy of fashion icon Dapper Dan, with the 1980s and early 1990s luxury clothing wraps, (re)purposings, and (re)envisionings (Day, 2019). Thinking about how this song and accompanying video stretched between decades and sonic sentiments, it helped me create a new assignment: the Sonic Lineage project.

Sitting with Sonic Lineage in Theory to Create Sonic Lineage in Practice

Sonic lineage (Craig, in press) is a term that builds upon Alfred Tatum's work on "textual lineage" through the prism of Dr. Bilal Polson's Instagram framework of #literacylineage and #textual-lineage (Polson, 2019). Sonic lineage functions based on the sounds, sights, and visuals that inform how one engages with historical musical trajectories, as well as ways that "readers" (or listeners) engage in the learning that comes from the sonic. Sonic lineage is not only a list of auditory or musical sources that share the same sentiment, but in some cases, it's an earlier source that predicates the existence of the newer source. Think of it as a "sound-line" of sorts: the lineage, the bloodline, and the family tree.

The Sonic Lineage project asks students to choose an album and document its sonic/textual lineage over the course of at least three decades of their choice (1970s, 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s). In mapping out the album's sonic/textual lineage, students are asked to tell the story of the album and the significant hip-hop (or hip-hop-connected) "texts" that contribute to the album's sonic literacy. This project focuses on students' discovery through research, creating a heuristic vis-à-vis the insight that comes from how they envision an album's sonic lineage.

This project serves as the prequel to a mixtape assignment I do with students entitled Heavy Airplay, All Day with No Chorus (Craig, 2019). Its overarching intention is to prepare students to delve into strictly composing with sound via mixtapes and playlists by asking them to submerge themselves in sound based

upon someone else's sonic sensibilities, and then connect those choices to at least three decades. It is a reflective assignment that forces students to write about sound so they can have the necessary tools to write with sound. The goal here is to situate the soundwriting and composing that comes out with the mixtape project by allowing students the space to engage in their mental and auditory discussions around sound via writing.

Yet, as I mention in my audio reflection, I want to get students past the apprehension around "more beats and sounds in the air" in lieu of "more words on the page." Thus, I envision a final project (project #3 below) where students create a sonic metatext and reflect on how they have engaged in theorizing and wrestling with sonic compositions. The submitted 3–10-minute sound file can allow for a moment of praxis, where students can live, stretch, and grow in a space that privileges sound as the only communicative medium to capture a sentiment that alphanumeric textual production simply cannot.

Assignments

Course Project #1: Sonic Lineage Project

For Course Project #1, you are required to choose an album and document its sonic lineage over the course of at least three decades (choose between the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s). In thinking about mapping out the album's sonic lineage, you should tell the story about the album as well as the significant hip-hop (or hip-hop-connected) texts that contribute to the album's sonic literacy. This project should focus on your own learning process and the insight that comes from how you envision the album's sonic lineage. Some questions you may want to ask yourself in completing this project are:

1. What are the significant "texts" that were influential in creating your album's literacy?
2. Describe the "texts" that contribute to your album's sonic literacy.
3. How did you identify these "texts"? Did someone point them out to you, or did you discover them on your own?
4. How is each sonic "text" significant to the album's creation?

This project should be submitted as either a Prezi, PowerPoint, or Google Slides presentation.

Course Project #3: The Sounding Board (Sonic Reflection Project)

For Course Project #3, you are required to reflect on how you have approached using sound/sonic elements throughout the semester. Because we are discussing sonics, this reflection must be a sound recording, and cannot be written. Your recording can be between 3–10 minutes long and should include your voice alongside at least three other sound/sonic elements. Some questions you might think about when composing your reflection include the following:

- Describe your experiences with sound this semester. What sonic sources have you chosen and how have you interrogated those sources this semester?
- What were your apprehensions or fears about working with sound-only sources/artifacts?
- Were you able to communicate specific thoughts and ideas through sound that you could not communicate with alphanumeric textual writing? What were those ideas? Explain your thinking fully.
- If you could revise any of your assignments based on revisiting your sonic sources, what are some revision choices you would make?

This project should be submitted as either a WAV or MP3 file.

Sample Student Projects

1. Hamed Afastu, "*Straight Outta Compton*: N.W.A.'s Influential Album": Afastu discusses the album's influence on contemporary protests and fashion, as well as how it's been sampled by and has influenced three decades of hip-hop.[1]
2. Alyse Ahmide, "*Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* Review": Ahmide takes a deep dive into the cultural influences on Wu-Tang Clan's first album and touches on the later careers of some of its members and its ongoing influence today.
3. Perry Stephano, "Textual Lineage of 'Some Rap Songs'": Stephano focuses on the history and meaning of the samples used by Earl Sweatshirt on his third and final album with Columbia Records.
4. Garrison Johanson, "*Everything Is Love:* A Connection to the Decades": Johanson's analysis of The Carters' collaborative album focuses on its reinterpretation of the styles and sounds of the 1960s and 1990s in a way that speaks to the present day.

Reflection

Todd Craig: Check, one, two—what's good everybody?[2] Todd Craig here, aka T. O. Double D on certain days, aka, the Diggy-Diggy-Doctor on other days; there's other "akas" that I can run through, but that's all we need for right now. You're listening to the audio reflection of "How *Eve* Saved My Soul": aka the "Sonic Lineage Project—the Prequel to the Playlist Project.

So, the Sonic Lineage project comes out of, you know, a very interesting time in my life.

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1.   Four student examples of the Sonic Lineage Project (PowerPoint slides) can be found on the book's companion website.

2.   The audio version of Todd Craig's reflection can be found on the book's companion website.

[Music: the instrumental to "Hatshepsut" by Rapsody featuring Queen Latifah fades in and continues beneath the following narration. It features prominent hip-hop beats and a walking bass line along with positive, major-key melodies played on a piano.]

I lost my mother right before I started teaching my first college-level hip-hop class. So first and foremost, shout out to Ruth Muchita: Thanks for everything, Mom, appreciate you. I was asked to teach my first college-level hip-hop course days after my mother's passing. And so it was a class that I took on specifically because my research is in . . . rooted in hip-hop, rooted in the hip-hop DJ. And so it just made sense. It was obviously a natural sort of evolution in what my teaching practice was. And so you can imagine what it was like trying to teach a class you've always wanted to teach for the first time, on one hand, and on the other hand, having lost a parent. You know, it was definitely a difficult moment. And what I found through this moment is the thing that got me through this, this period of mourning and grieving, was literally an album from a hip-hop artist named Rapsody (2019). The name of the album is *Eve*, and what Rapsody was able to do with that album was incredible.

Clearly a concept album, where each song is dedicated to sort of an ode or an homage to a particular Black woman, who has, you know, done extraordinary work, you know, in the country, and the globe, in whatever it is that they do. And each of those songs kind of embodies and evokes that woman sonically, in ways where Rapsody just really nailed it. And what became interesting for me about this album was I could hear my mother in every single song. I could see her, hear her, you know, I could feel her presence. And every facet of her kind of came out in Rapsody sort of evoking these different Black women.

[Music slowly fades out as Craig continues speaking.]

And so, as I was listening to the Rapsody album, one of the songs that really just caught my attention straight away was "Ibtihaj." And that is a song named after Ibtihaj Muhammad, who was the first Muslim American woman to win a medal in an Olympics—she was a bronze medalist.

[Music: the instrumental to "Ibtihaj" by Rapsody featuring GZA and D'Angelo fades in and continues below the continuing narration. We can hear organ, beats, and eventually a group singing indistinct words.]

But she's also the first Muslim American woman to wear a hijab while fencing. And what struck me about this song in particular is that "Ibtihaj" as a song is a remix, or an interpolation of sorts, of a song by the GZA, or the Genius, from the Wu-Tang Clan, from his solo album, entitled *Liquid Swords* (1995). The name of the song is "Liquid Swords." So there's already this interesting relation between Rapsody using "Liquid Swords," and then naming that song "Ibtihaj," given that she was a fencer. Rapsody has GZA come and do a guest verse, and

there is also guest vocalist, R&B, you know, legend D'Angelo, who also sings the hook on the song.

And so the song is pretty significant because the Rapsody album came out in 2019. This song reaches back to the GZA's album in 1995, but also includes GZA on the record, you know, twenty-some-odd . . . yeah, twenty-some-odd years later.

[Music slowly fades out as Craig continues speaking.]

And what became even more incredible for me was the video to "Ibtihaj," and what I immediately noticed in the video was, you know, there was this—it's a video that's set in Harlem.

[Music: the instrumental to "Liquid Swords" by the GZA fades in; this is the song that Rapsody samples from for "Ibtihaj." It features repeated, rhythmic keyboard chords played one after the other over a beat, playing one chord eight times and then another chord eight times before repeating.]

Rapsody's from North Carolina, so it's interesting that she would bring a video up to be set in Harlem. A number of different Black women, Muslim women in hijabs of various just colors and designs (see Thompson, 2019). There was also a number of different moments where there are different cars and different elements of the video that are wrapped in MCM, which is a sort of designer bag company. But the wrap comes from Dapper Dan, who is—I want to say Dapper Dan is currently with Gucci. But early on in the 1980s and 1990s, Dapper Dan was based in Harlem, and was this incredible fashion designer who would take all of these luxury bags and sort of re-envision them and make clothes, car seats, all sorts of different things for hip-hop culture at the time. And it became super interesting to me that Rapsody in 2019 was reaching back to 1995 and the GZA, was reaching back into the 1980s and early 1990s with Dapper Dan. And that kind of spawned how this idea of sonic lineage comes—this kind of thinking around what different elements sonically, visually connect to a song in the present day. And how far back does that lineage travel? You know, sonic lineage is very reminiscent to Alfred Tatum's (2009) idea of textual lineage.

And one of the people who really, really helped me to kind of spark and envision what sonic lineage looks like, was Dr. Bilal Polson, who . . . Dr. Polson did a year's worth of IG posts (Polson, 2020), where he would post different songs daily, kind of evoking the lineage that other people had based on the song. He would just post an image of a 45, maybe it's a YouTube video, maybe it's a 12-inch, just so people could begin to then have conversations around what that song meant to them, what that song evoked from them. And so in looking at this moment, with Rapsody, "Ibtihaj," and understanding "Liquid Swords," and understanding all of the complexities that Rapsody was weaving throughout the song, and then also the album, that brought me to wanting to do an assignment with students called the Sonic Lineage assignment, where I wanted students to identify an album that

they related to. And then I wanted them to connect different routes and different streams of thought that appear in that present-day album, at whatever time it was, but then connect it to three different decades.

[Music slowly fades out as Craig continues speaking.]

Those decades could have been the 1970s, the 1980s, the 1990s, 2000s, or the 2010s.

[Music: the song "Mercy, Mercy, Mercy" by Willie Mitchell fades in; this is the song that is sampled for the opening of "Liquid Swords." It's a positive soul track with lots of horns and bass.]

So giving students about half a century to think about how they are seeing the strands that run through an album in different timeframes. And the idea was to really get students to begin to think about how they would address the sonic, think about how they would address writing about music, thinking about music, and re-envisioning music so that music is the primary text and is not a secondary, tertiary, or even a source that is unacceptable unless it is beefed up by a bunch of other sources. So that's where this idea of the Sonic Lineage project came from. It's also a project that I would do with students before it . . . this project is the first project, the next project they do is a mixtape project, which I call Heavy Airplay, All Day With No Chorus. The mixtape project of course asked students to create a mixtape or a playlist.

[Music slowly fades out as Craig continues speaking.]

So they're really sort of composing with different songs and sounds and ideas that they have around the music.

[Music: "Groovin'" by Willie Mitchell fades in; this is the song that is sampled for the beat of both "Liquid Swords" and "Ibtihaj." It's positive, happy soul music, with a very prominent organ.]

But what the Sonic Lineage project . . . what it aimed to do was to get students to begin to think about what it meant to address music and how you think and write about music, so that you can then begin to write with music.

In terms of reflections, I think the assignment went okay. One of the things I would definitely consider doing, as I continue to do this assignment with other students, is really pushing students to think outside of the box in terms of making their assignments or their projects way more multimodal. I asked that students did this in PowerPoint or Prezi or Google Slides. I didn't want it to be a Microsoft Word document with words on the page. And I was really envisioning that students would have hyperlinks to different songs, and kind of make those connections, maybe do some audio. And what I found was that students were really, really apprehensive about kind of going "all the way there" and pushing the envelope in terms of sound. And in terms of really, really incorporating sound,

they still weren't really trusting in the fact that that's what I wanted. And they were kind of leaning on their collegiate, academic sensibilities of, "I need to have more words on the page than I need to have beats in the air."

[Music slowly fades out as Craig continues speaking.]

So that is something I think that I would really push students towards, is really trying to do a little less of the literal writing and more thinking about making these connections sonically, using different audio, using different images and video links, to really give them the sense of creating a sonic lineage and a sonic roadmap and family tree of sorts when they are addressing this project.

[Music: the instrumental to "Believe Me" by Rapsody fades in; with its modern hip-hop beats, bass, and keyboard lines, it's a striking contrast to the music that's been playing.]

So those are my thoughts. That's where I'm at with this project. And I'm looking forward to continuing to push forward with this project and have students push the envelope. I hope this project is helpful to you to get your students to kind of push the envelope in thinking about how they are beginning to address sound so that they're able to then write *with* sound. So that is it for me. I want to, again, give a shout out to, give a shout out to Rapsody, because the *Eve* album is absolutely crazy. And you know, the fact that she didn't win a Grammy for that one is a whole different conversation in and of itself, but we won't talk about that. But shouts to Rapsody, shouts to the *Eve* album. And that is it. Thank you for listening. Thank you for tuning in.

Also, really quick before I go, I definitely want to shout out Courtney and Michael and Kyle, all the other contributors. Thanks for making this *Amplifying Soundwriting* project possible. We definitely all appreciate it; salutes to you as editors.

And with that, I'm gone! Todd Craig, T. O. Double D: I will see you on the next go-round.

Peace!

[Music slowly fades out.]

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